

BOOK REVIEW



Reel to Real

Tapes made by JFK and Johnson in office reveal much about the men and the crises they faced

TAKING CHARGE The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964

Edited by
Michael R. Beschloss
Simon & Schuster; 591 pages; \$30

On audiocassette: Simon & Schuster;
four cassettes; abridged; \$25

THE KENNEDY TAPES Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis

Edited by Ernest R. May
and Philip D. Zelikow
Harvard University Press; 728 pages;
\$35

Reviewed by Patricia Holt

Like a Shakespearean scene interpreted by "Farley" cartoonist Phil Frank, President Lyndon Baines Johnson erupts with thunderous anger at his enemies, slathers flattery on perceived friends and fanatically surveys the giant chessboard he sees as American politics.

And in "Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964," we get to hear it all.

"I'm not getting into any Bay of Pigs deal!" Johnson yells in December 1963 at then-Sen-

ator William Fulbright, who's asked if Johnson is thinking about invading Cuba to stop weapons sales. "I'm just asking you what we ought to do to pinch their nuts more than we're doing."

Pinch their nuts? What nostalgia! That's the colorful LBJ we've heard about but never really known until now, the one who uses old boys' club profanity to cajole a future adversary into toeing the White House line.

"I don't want you to cut his nuts out because he's a Negro," Johnson says to Arkansas senator and segregationist John

McClellan about appointing black journalist Carl Rowan as director of the U.S. Information Agency. "And I've seen you operate with a knife and I have seen a few people get denuded."

McClellan: "I wouldn't say that."

LBJ: "I didn't want you to... send him home one day without his peter."

Thanks to historian Michael Beschloss ("Kennedy and Roosevelt," "Mayday"), the White House tapes that Johnson secretly recorded throughout his presidency have been transcribed and edited in an ex-

hausting and meticulous process. Even the recordings that LBJ's secretaries transcribed at the time have been given new scrutiny. While we can't blame his staff for becoming so accustomed to Johnson's cussing that they misunderstood his complaint about a "pack [of] them bastards" waiting to speak to him, it's a lucky thing Beschloss listened closely and checked Johnson's daily diary to find the quote really meant the "Pakistan ambassador."

Because Beschloss draws in-

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information from every book written about the Johnson administration, including Lady Bird Johnson's diaries, his footnotes carry the authority of script annotations, explaining every secret, every ragged breath, every hidden intention and every lie that occurred during the conversations recorded.

He catches J. Edgar Hoover completely "misunderstanding the path and impact of the bullets that killed John F. Kennedy. He tells us the little-known fact that Johnson had an "intimate relationship" with former California senatorial candidate Helen Gahagan Douglas in the 1940s.

He explains why Texas Governor John Connally declines an invitation ("Here Connally snubs the President of the United States by saying that he cannot come to see him because he must pick out furnishings for a new house") and shows how Johnson, "amid growing conflicts with [Robert Kennedy], is taking particular care to keep his other Kennedy fences mended."

"You can take my job any time that you're ready," an appallingly phony Johnson tells Edward Kennedy. "Cause I'm just a trustee that's trying to carry on the best that I can..." With such aw-shucks bravado, Johnson advances but never seems responsible for Kennedy's Civil Rights Bill and war in Vietnam—even as he secretly plots to bludgeon anybody in his path into concession, including the increasingly ambitious attorney general, Robert Kennedy.

Johnson's mastery of the calculated suck-up is also balanced by what Beschloss calls "the Johnson treatment," his manner of delivering an ultimatum while pretending to ask for approval. At 1 p.m. he calls popular Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver to tell him, "I'm gonna announce your appointment" as head of the fledgling War on Poverty—at 3 p.m.

Shriver, knowing nothing of Johnson's new project, begins babbling: "God, I think it would be advisable, if you don't mind, if I could have this week and sit down with a couple of people and see what we could get in the way of some sort of plan..." You announce somebody... and they don't know what the hell they are doing..." Johnson: "Just go away to Camp David and figure it out."

Johnson appears to barge blithely on to each new conquest, but the tapes show him to be peculiarly sensitive to civil rights (this selection of an African American secretary, with whom he integrated at least one country club, cost him many votes) and worried enough about popular opinion that he considered step-



President Lyndon Johnson (center, above) gave instructions to speechwriter Theodore Sorensen (left) and Senator Hubert Humphrey. At right, President John F. Kennedy met with U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson.

ping down from the presidency as early as 1964.

But the best part is listening to Lyndon and Lady Bird work as a team in the audiocassette version of "Taking Charge." Here Beschloss has put together some of the most delectable listening this side of "Fibber McGee and Molly": Beside Johnson's Texas rave and rant, we're surprised to hear, in the famous Lady Bird wheedle, how sharp, sweet, critical and farsighted she can be. One can hardly imagine John F. Kennedy putting Jackie on the line to cajole former presidents and legislators onto the presidential bandwagon.

Still, Johnson appears the ultimate pragmatist compared with John F. Kennedy's sense of history and diplomacy in "The Kennedy Tapes," edited by Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow. Here, during the two weeks of the Cuban missile crisis that nearly touched off World War III in October 1962, Kennedy's secret tapes bring us so close to hot-zone politics we can hardly breathe.

Unlike Beschloss, who simply plunges us into the tapes, May and Zelikow provide a helpful and thorough introduction of all the elements that prey on Kennedy's mind. They explain the basis of "first strike" (we bomb them first) and "second strike" (keep nuclear bombers in the air in case they hit us first) strategies. They describe the impact of JFK's disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba; the building of the Berlin Wall; the conciliatory approach of the Munich talks with Hitler before World War II, as opposed to the bomb-the-hell-out-of-them approach by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor; the U-2 crisis in which reconnaissance pilot Gary Powers was shot down in the Soviet Union in 1960; the increasing-



FROM THE KENNEDY TAPES

ly incendiary position of Nikita Khrushchev, who appears to be spooling for a fight.

Thus, as the first U-2 to fly since the Powers debacle brings undeniable evidence that the Soviets are using Cuba as a nuclear missile base ("This is a result of the photography taken Sunday, sir. There's a medium-range ballistic-missile launch site and 2 new military encampments"), Kennedy and his "Ex Comm" (Executive Committee) are faced with few options.

"If we go in and take them out on a quick air strike," Kennedy muses, "we neutralize the chance of danger to the United States of these missiles being used..." On the other hand, we increase the chance greatly, as I think there's bound to be a reprisal from the Soviet Union—there always is—[of] their just going in and taking Berlin by force. Which leaves me only one alternative, which is to fire nuclear weapons... Because if we do nothing... We're going to have this knife stuck right in our guts [from the missiles in Cuba]."

The conversations are articulate, focused, tough-minded and intense beyond measure. Time is running out; the missiles are near completion; the hawks grow im-

patient as Kennedy insists upon combining options, slowing the U.S. response. General David Shoup explodes in anger when he thinks he's alone with other military personnel. "Somebody's got to keep them [Kennedy and supporters] from doing the goddamn thing piecemeal. That's our problem. Go in there and friggin' around with the missiles. You're screwed. Go in there and friggin' around with the lift. You're screwed. You're screwed, screwed, screwed."

Convictions become mired in details. As Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara moves toward the idea of setting up a blockade as a means of opening negotiations, Robert Kennedy sides with those who advocate using the blockade as an ultimatum, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk wants to use the blockade as a way "to freeze the Soviet action rather than reverse it, and then decide what to do."

Khrushchev, meanwhile, attempts to make the matter sound like business as usual. After all, through NATO, the United States has missile bases all over Europe, so when the Soviet Union helps out the Cuban government with missiles "solely for the purpose of defense," Khrushchev says, Ken-

nedy is wrong to "misinterpret" the move as a threat. In a veiled reference to the Bay of Pigs, he also reminds Kennedy who attacked Cuba the first time.

But that was then: "Mr. President, do you really seriously think that Cuba can attack the United States [and get away with it] today? Khrushchev asks in an astonishing letter of scorn and conciliation. "[W]e understand perfectly well that if we attack you, you will respond the same way. But you too will receive the same that you hurl against us."

By October 26, Khrushchev proposes that if the United States promises not to invade Cuba and to withdraw its ships, the Soviets will stop transporting armaments to Cuba and Fidel Castro will "declare mobilization." That he appears to retract this offer the next day, calling for a trade (Russian missiles out of Cuba for U.S. missiles out of Turkey), sending a ship steaming toward the American blockade and continuing work inside Cuba on the missile bases, throws the Ex Comm conversation in turmoil.

"He's put this out in a way to cause maximum tension and embarrassment," Kennedy notes. Removing missiles from Turkey could be seen as saving the United States at the expense of NATO. At the same time, Kennedy observes, "We can't very well invade Cuba, with all the toil and blood it's going to be, when we could have gotten them out by making a deal on the same missiles in Turkey."

The Cuban missile crisis has gone down in history as Kennedy's finest hour, because he intelligently and with great fortitude stood up to the threatening Evil Empire. In a face-off that accurately nailed Khrushchev as the kind of bully who sees attempts at negotiation as weakness yet runs away at any show of real strength, it was not Kennedy who backed down. "In order to save the world, Khrushchev told the President on October 28, "we must retreat."

Yet, as the book points out, Kennedy sounded tough and principled in public but privately promised Khrushchev that missiles "would eventually be withdrawn from Turkey," the authors report. This accommodation has not been recorded in history as much as the headlines of the time that described a retreating Khrushchev: "He Blinked!"

For this reason it's difficult to read "The Kennedy Tapes" without thinking of one politician's image of nuclear-weapons escalation as two quarreling boys standing in a pool of gasoline, each holding a box of matches. It's nice to know that in the end, Kennedy acquiesced to a deal that really did save the world.

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